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### Six rules for practice-led research

#### Abstract:

Recent experience of practice-led postgraduate supervision has prompted me to conclude that the practice-led research method, as it is currently construed, produces good outcomes, especially in permitting practitioners in the creative arts, design and media into the research framework, but at the same time it also generates certain recurring difficulties. What are these difficulties? Practice-led candidates tend to rely on a narrow range of formulations with the result that they assume: (i) the innovative nature of practice-led research; (ii) that its novelty is based in opposition to other research methods; (iii) that practice is intrinsically research, often leading to tautological formulations; and (iv) the hyper-self-reflexive nature of practice-led research. This paper proposes a set of guidelines composed in order to circumvent the shortcomings that result from these recurring formulations. My belief is that, if these shortcomings are avoided, there is nothing to prevent practice-led from further developing as a research inquiry and thus achieving rewarding and successful research outcomes. Originally composed for the purposes of postgraduate supervision, these six rules are presented here in the context of a wider analysis of the emergence of practice-led research and its current conditions of possibility as a research method.

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#### Keywords:

Practice-led research – Higher degree research training – Arts training in higher education – Professional practice as research

## Introduction

I originally composed a set of guidelines for practice-led research (PLR) for my own use as a supervisor. What prompted me to draft these elementary ‘rules’ was the experience of working simultaneously with two PLR candidates at opposite stages of the PhD cycle – one at the beginning of their candidature, the other nearing completion – yet finding common difficulties occurring. Because these problems were arising irrespective of the candidate’s level of research experience and progression within their candidature, I pondered whether the problem lay with the students or with the general conception of PLR. This led me to explore some wider issues of PLR as it has developed to date. The result is a combination of both practical guidelines and analysis of its progress.

First, a word of explanation: while I am a researcher, I am not a *practice-led* researcher. These rules emerge from a long and largely happy experience of supervising studio-based, practice-led higher degree research candidates. Long before the term ‘practice-led research’ had been coined, I supervised postgraduates who sought to incorporate their creative practice within a course of study that included a research exegesis or thesis (that is, at the Masters or PhD level). To my mind, there was never any doubt that it is possible to uphold rigorous academic standards without compromising or stifling the creative component. Of course, this is an ambitious and unique research task, which makes PLR a compelling, though sometimes precarious, mode of research. This is what makes it exciting and fascinating. In recent years, however, as PLR has developed, I have noticed a propensity of postgraduate candidates to rely on a few select authors or formulations to make often quite audacious claims about PLR as a research method. At the same time, it is not clear that the emergence of PLR has always helped practice-led candidates better explain their methodologies as research practitioners. In fact, they are often more confused in offering such explanations than if they had said they were utilizing a whole range of other research methods as they had done in the past. At least two of the following rules address why this potential confusion might be so. These ‘rules’ were devised for the practical benefit of research candidates in order to avoid such pitfalls. They may even be just as useful for other supervisors of PLR candidates. The intention is to contribute to the rigor and standing of PLR, not to denigrate it.

## The higher education background context to PLR

The integration of art schools into the tertiary-education sector has provoked concern that the arts schools and art practice, but also the practice-led professions in general, are at a perennial disadvantage because they find themselves within a system that was not set up for their needs (Buckley & Conomos 2009: Introduction). Compounding this suspicion was the view that, while an art practice was already regarded as a worthy object of research and study, the actual practice from a practitioner’s perspective was not considered research or even capable of being accommodated in the academic research framework (Petelin 2006: 26). Even when brought into such a framework, it was presumed that artistic works or design production were simply incapable ‘of justifying

their contribution to the field of knowledge’, nor could they be relied upon ‘to communicate the meaning of its existence’ – not unless they were aided in the process by developing a different set of research tools to assist their accommodation into the research framework (de Freitas 2007: 2).

It has been noted that universities and the arts have pursued common ambitions for nearly two centuries: namely, ‘critical thinking, the search for new knowledge and a quest for excellence’ (Hill 2012a). Despite the affinities and the admission of practitioners into the academy, the downside is that the integration of art schools into the university-led, tertiary education framework is still viewed with scepticism as a *de facto* process of institutional and educational homogenization, which eradicates these complementary capacities rather than allows them to prosper. The ‘classical-modern university’, in the eyes of its critics within the arts school sector, is narrowly devoted to ‘its ideology of scientism and vocational education’, as well as its prevailing rhetoric focusing on ‘accountability, “partnerships with industry” and “investing in the future”’ at the expense of exploring its shared interest in ‘navigating the uncharted waters of creativity’ (Buckley & Conomos 2009: 7, 9, 6). In some respects this should not come as a surprise. In the Australian context, the justification for these mergers announced by the Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, in the 1987 Green Paper, ‘Higher education: A policy discussion paper’, was an economic modernization agenda tying higher education closer to industry needs. The supposition being that a more highly skilled population would be more flexible and responsive to technological change and therefore that a well-educated workforce adjusted more readily to a global economy (Marginson 1997: 160-63). As with much public policy, it created a one size fits all model.

This uniformity is perceived to have resulted in the current day difficulties facing arts education in the tertiary education system: overcrowded classrooms; the marginalization of the art school within the hierarchy of university management; the erosion of creative time in favour of the demands of management-driven, ‘compliance’-led bureaucracy; research funding based on ‘theory-driven, text-based grant applications’ at the expense of ‘visual and creative evidence’. Crucially, the system is regarded as having produced a schism between a dominant academic culture – ‘a mix of disciplined methodology, scholarship and laboratory-based research’ – and the vanquished – ‘a mixture of skills, creativity and studio-based research’ (Hill 2012b). What was the point of accommodation if the assimilation within the tertiary-education sector meant, as some fear, being fatally compromised by the bureaucratic-managerial dictates of the traditional university system?

Two points about this form of critique: one, there is a tendency to assume that these developments are being enforced upon the old art and design school sector exclusively, and that it is being singled out unfairly by a system that willingly sacrifices imaginative endeavours to its ‘flattening’ measures of research precision. There is a wealth of analysis examining such trends to a ‘management-driven, “compliance”-led’ bureaucratic approach in higher education and it is clear that these tendencies impact upon all sectors:

the sciences complain as much as the humanities. Unfortunately, this is a story for another time and place, but suffice to say that such developments must be considered in terms of the entire higher education system today – and it is an increasingly global phenomenon (Lorenz 2012). Two, there was a high degree of complicity with the tertiary education amalgamations on the part of many senior artist-administrators, who were only too keen to adopt the esteem of academic accreditation and join the ranks of the professoriate. Many had little research training and few had research higher degrees. This resulted in a degree of discursive insularity and passivity in this sector, which meant that – up until recently – it has proven ineffective in arguing its strengths. It is therefore doubtful that such widespread tendencies in higher education could be resolved simply by artists resuming the reins of power (Buckley & Conomos 2009: 5).<sup>1</sup>

PLR therefore envisages and formulates its place within an academic system that is itself experiencing profound pressures. This produces a classic chicken and egg conundrum: is PLR the consequence of institutional imperatives, such as the requirement to meet research assessment measures? After all, creative and professional practices can flourish perfectly well without PLR. Still, it is very difficult to suggest that PLR arises as a direct consequence of being incorporated within the institutional research paradigm. The current institutional research environment is skewing all research in certain directions (increasingly instrumental and/or directly vocational outcomes) and PLR is not alone in regard to operating in a very particular environment. PLR can be regarded as the formulation of a mature sector operating within the academic environment, which is better equipped to assert its role – such as confronting the challenge to ‘navigate the uncharted waters of creativity’. I am wholly supportive of this kind of endeavour within a straitened research environment. At the same time, if one adheres to the negative prognosis of the current state of the higher education sector, then my guidelines for PLR are likely to be greeted as a further example of the exertion of traditional academic values being imposed where they do not adequately suit. Whatever one’s opinion of the place of higher-degree research in practice-led disciplines, the reality of its existence can no longer be glossed over or dismissed. PLR looks set to stay – and to continue to present its case. At its most challenging, PLR can provide a method for confronting the tension between research uncertainty and concrete research measures. Yet, as I have made clear, I believe PLR is susceptible to certain pitfalls that prevent it from realising its ambitions, and its analyses to date have contained insufficient account of these weaknesses or limitations.

Because these rules emerged from practical experience of research training rather than from a polemic with PLR as a research paradigm, they seek to mitigate problems before they occur. I became committed to composing them when I saw the same issues arise repeatedly in supervision. They point to a key tension in the way PLR has been formulated to date. Beginning with an assessment focused on the marginalization of arts and professional practice in the academic research environment, PLR has quickly moved to outline not only a credible, identifiable research method for creative practices, but to declare that PLR forms a wholly new paradigm of research distinct from traditional

modes of research (Haseman 2006). This is a major leap in one single bound, particularly when the elementary groundwork of the research method is still being elaborated. One difficulty with this assertion is that PLR candidates over-estimate PLR's capacity as a result – which the original authors may not have foreseen or intended – and this translates (in my experience as a supervisor) into claims that cannot always be substantiated and do little to advance the development of PLR. In short, the claim to research innovation often acts as a research shortcut that prevents PLR candidates from adequately establishing their own critical parameters.

Just to reiterate one last time: the following guidelines are not written from the perspective of a PLR antagonist. I am not opposed to PLR. Rather, these proposals for best practice emerge from a sympathetic engagement with the ambitions of PLR, even if they are tempered by occasional frustrations with how it is realized at this point in time.

### *The Six Rules*

**Rule 1: *Eliminate – or at the very least, limit – the use of the first person pronoun, 'I', as a centrepiece of a research formulation.***

When writing an exegesis or thesis, practice-led researchers should monitor whether whole passages are becoming over-reliant on the use of 'I'. Whenever this occurs, it is more than likely that the research topic is becoming blurred or lost entirely.

This will seem difficult to avoid if one's own practice is the focus of the research inquiry, but this is where the trap lies. The warning runs counter to the familiar modes of expression in creative and design practices – such as the practitioner's statement, artist talk, an interview, the sleeve note in music, etc. – which primarily serve to explicate an original, creative intention.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis shows how influential concepts of relative cultural autonomy, originality and creative innovation remain, concepts which are also ingrained in standard research requirements, e.g. the criteria to challenge prevailing wisdom or established understanding when circumstances or facts require, or even the imperative to afford 'new insights'. After all, the criterion of a PhD is its contribution to knowledge. Once one enters the research terrain, however, an additional requirement becomes necessary, which the pithy British definition of research makes starkly clear: research is a 'process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared' (Research Excellence Framework 2011: 32).

The challenge for the creative fields is, however, this shift from the quasi-confessional mode of the artist statement to a research model that requires a critical reflection involving the communication of the contribution to knowledge and its findings. It may not seem a big step, but it is significant for PLR because it requires practitioners to go one step further, beyond a 'business as usual' model of exposition of intention or description of practice. Within PLR, this is occurring: for instance, Brad Haseman provides the example of an 'artistic audit' in which practice-based researchers 'reach beyond their own labours to connect with both earlier and contemporaneous productions'

in order to provide a ‘research context for their work’ (Haseman 2006: 105). Going beyond the parameters of one’s practice to provide a historical or conceptual context for a creative or professional practice is an important way of establishing whether new insights are being produced or not.

A good rule of thumb therefore is that over-reliance on the use of ‘I’ correlates with a drift away from research clarity and from providing any research context at all. This is usually because the researcher is conflating their own subjectivity, or individual experience, with the research project. At these moments, the research topic becomes the researcher and not the research question. It is very hard to think of any other form of research inquiry in which this could happen so readily. This is likely because the pivotal research imperative – the sharing and communication of the contribution to knowledge within the field of research inquiry – is often counteracted by the many (subtle or otherwise) signals that suggest that just doing practice is already research. Hence, there needs to be extra scrutiny and awareness of its dangers in PLR. Whenever one sees a proliferation of ‘I’, ‘I’, ‘I’ occurring, then take it as a warning sign that the research topic is fading from view!

While rules or guidelines regarding writing may be broken for effect, impact or a useful critical or literary purpose – after all, I have used the ‘I’ stance in my introduction to this piece – postgraduate candidates and researchers should consider these two questions:

- Can my PLR function without an overreliance on the use of the ‘I’ stance?
- Can my PLR survive without making personal experience the criteria of its research?

It should; hence, Rule 2.

**Rule 2: *Avoid recourse to one’s own experience as the basis or justification of the research ambition.***

Should the goal of PLR be to make sense of a practitioner’s own life or experience? (I’ve actually seen this written as a goal and outcome of PLR.) Sorry, but the answer is ‘no’! Rather, the goal of research – in all its forms – should be to explain something of significance and of broader relevance to a research community; this may be a larger, cross-disciplinary research community, or it may be a wider public audience. The primary criterion is not that the researcher makes sense of his or her own experience. *The research project may do this, but this does not justify it as research.* In particular, a PhD research project needs to justify its research contribution in terms that extend past the researcher’s subjective experience.

The temptation to resort to personal experience as an aspect of critical reflection is perhaps most perilous with candidates who do not have an established body of practice to draw and reflect upon.<sup>3</sup> In my experience as a supervisor, the recourse to the experiential invariably detours the research candidate from developing their research insights. In such cases, the recourse to the experiential, if unchecked, becomes a permanent detour from the advancement and articulation of research significance. Yet the example of the artist

statement, an example particularly prominent in the visual arts, already breaks with one perceived impediment that PLR literature perceives to be a problem: that written outcomes necessarily distort creative practice (Haseman 2006: 100). Artists, like most creative practitioners, need to be able to articulate the ambition of their practices in a variety of ways because their fields are highly competitive and their careers always fluctuating. Being a postgraduate candidate can enhance this capacity to articulate what is crucial about one's practice, while also having the time, resources and space for critical reflection to take the practice to a higher level (at least of reflection). At least, this is an ideal scenario, but creative practices do not need higher research degrees in order to flourish. The notion that 'practice-led research is inherently experiential', as Brad Haseman puts it, might be putting it the wrong way round – creative practice is 'inherently experiential', its knowledge tacitly formed, but placing it within the criteria of research nonetheless requires an additional level of consideration and communication (Haseman 2006: 100). By pinpointing an area where supervision regularly encounters difficulties, this rule not only serves as a warning alert for candidates and supervisors alike, but it also highlights an area of the PLR framework that requires further conceptual development.

Always remember: the criterion for a PhD remains its contribution to knowledge, not to psychotherapy!

**Rule 3: *Avoid PLR instrumental relations between theory and practice; and avoid conflating practice with research.***

PLR must avoid two crucial confluences that limit its potential as a field of inquiry. The first is the conflation of practice with research (presuming the practice constitutes research per se, that is, in advance of conducting any research inquiry or communicating any contribution to knowledge). The second type of conflation is not as common, but still quite prevalent: it is the conflation between the creative practice and the conceptual, historical or intellectual influences deployed in the exegetical component. To start with the second conflation: conceptual, historical and other intellectual influences can certainly help to explicate the practice and place it in a wider context, which begins the process of outlining how the research investigation produces new insights within its field of inquiry. Too often, however, PLR candidates slip into a type of argument that assumes that a particular method, theory or philosophical approach *explains* the practice (as if a theory were formulated with the particular practice in mind).

Other forms of research inquiry or intellectual endeavour are just as prone to reducing a creative practice or an artwork to a mere reflex of its argument, but highlighting other instrumental-reductive examples does not make the situation better. Whether propagated by a theorist, historian or creative practitioner, such arguments tend to be deterministic and tacitly assume that a practice or a work and a contextual framework operate as mirrors of one another.



Good PLR does not render an intellectual or theoretical framework instrumental to the practice. A practical solution is to avoid making one's own creative practice the sole focus of the PLR exegesis. It is helpful instead to establish an independent research question from a context that consists of a rigorous literature review examining other practices, wider creative and cultural contexts, historical precedents, or shared themes explored elsewhere in other practices – all of which permits a certain degree of critical distance from the remorseless consideration of one's own practice. Incorporating into the exegesis analyses of practices or intellectual discussions that are at one remove from the candidate's own practice helps to avoid the conflation of the creative practice with the exegetical component.

One reason this does not happen regularly or consistently enough is a strong tendency in PLR to conflate research and practice. This is the result of an imperative in PLR that assumes that any exegetical analysis and inquiry should remain focused almost exclusively on the candidate's practice. Furthermore, it contends that practice is already research in its practice. For instance, in an early defence of practice as research, Richard Vella states that he prefers the term 'exegetical perspective' because 'artistic work has its own embedded knowledge'. OK, no problem there. Yet, Vella goes on to argue that because artistic work contains 'embedded knowledge', then it follows that artistic work 'is therefore research' (2005: 2). This is a fatal error when generalised, and it has the potential to circumvent the whole possibility of PLR. There is no reason to assume that embedded knowledge automatically qualifies as 'research'. In fact, the presumption can lead to many of the problems that prompted me to devise the first and second rules. In his enthusiasm, Vella goes so far as to argue that the 'exegetical perspective' can extend to encompass 'the creative work's contradictions, anomalies and ambiguities' (2005: 2). This is akin to asking the PLR candidate to play analyst and patient simultaneously; it also produces that oddly circuitous motion in PLR of searching for an inquiry in the process of conducting an inquiry – and then arguing that this is the triumph of PLR as a research method (Refer Rule 6).

PLR at its best requires a deft touch by any researcher, let alone the most inexperienced. Good PLR is a complicated affair necessitating a complex, back-and-forth interaction between the practice and its conceptual framework or articulation. It forces one to consider how each component – the creative practice and exegetical research framework – is capable of producing knowledge, and thus of furnishing unique understanding and insights. No theory or history or context will 'apply' readymade to a particular creative practice, nor should it be expected to. This is where the development and forging of new knowledge occurs. Every *practice* or sphere of research inquiry possesses its own particular languages, histories and modes of inquiry – and each may have some lesson to draw in terms of how to escape deterministic or instrumental formulations.

For instance, my own field of art history was forged in the attempt to address a quantitative and a qualitative research imperative simultaneously. One side of its research was more empirical or archival, e.g. digging up new facts to permit new histories to emerge. The other side of its inquiry involves equally important, but more 'abstract'

contextual considerations, such as those of historical interpretation and method, questions of value, aesthetics and philosophical issues, the history of ideas, changing understandings of art, etc. The two facets of inquiry often produce different kinds of art historians, but in conjunction – as the name art history implies, encompassing both *art* and *history* – it involves a tussle between accounting for the individual case, the idiosyncratic dimension of a creative practice, and the necessary elaboration of a wider context or framework that makes sense of the imaginative and idiosyncratic and strives to make it comprehensible. Art history's research object, art, is like a square peg that has emerged from a round hole. There are many ways of pulverising it back into a particular context in order to show how successful an interpretation is, but the true dynamic of the research *practice* emerges from the attempt to set its quantitative and qualitative dimensions in play, and keep them in play, without flattening either. The research inquiry seeks to explain the singularity of the individual case, without evaporating or denying historical memory, a history of practices and conventions, changing meanings of art, and changing material conditions, as well as changing dynamics in the overall culture and society, etc. – in short, preserving singularity, while recognizing that the object of inquiry cannot be understood without a context, and that contextual understanding fails if it is too deterministic.<sup>4</sup>

**Rule 4: *Always write an abstract that equally encompasses one's creative practice and the exegesis and/or thesis component.***

Practice-led researchers and/or candidates should always aim to write an abstract or summary that seamlessly covers both aspects of their research – that is, the written exegesis as well as their practice. This is easier said than done. It may prove difficult to achieve at first – often taking many attempts – but persisting with the task will ensure that many of the problems mentioned above are avoided. While this advice may appear to contradict the point made in Rule 3, it doesn't: a good abstract will help to highlight how research inquiry carries across both the practice and the exegesis. If well formulated, it should also help to overcome the instrumental reduction of one to the other.

**Rule 5: *Good PLR can acknowledge other research paradigms.***

Good PLR will freely acknowledge other research paradigms. Researchers and candidates need not fear that their PLR will dissolve or be neutralised simply because it comes into contact with, or acknowledges, other research paradigms. A tendency of an emergent research paradigm like PLR is to define itself far too defensively. This can occur when it inflates its own autonomy or privileges its research position by dismissing other paradigms as suspicious or a threat to its existence.

With PLR, there is a tendency to overstate its potentially innovative, but essentially emerging, research position by labelling other research paradigms as 'conservative', 'traditional', or 'risk intolerant', etc. Fledgling researchers tend to over-valorise the fact

that PLR is emerging. Moreover they assume that terms such as ‘reflective practice’ are unique to PLR, as if PLR alone has the inbuilt capacity to reflect on itself. Similarly PLR seems to set itself up as a ‘necessarily unpredictable’ inquiry, thus implying that all other forms of research are less open and responsive to the open-ended nature of research.<sup>5</sup> PLR clearly has a contribution to make in this direction, but it is an unfortunate propensity of inexperienced candidates to over-estimate the innovative, unpredictable nature of PLR and, as a consequence, to dismiss a whole host of writers, thinkers, researchers or research paradigms as ‘traditional’ when in fact most are well known or established precisely because in many cases they are nimble, imaginative and critically creative.

The issue arises when students or candidates are encouraged to believe that PLR is an autonomous paradigm, surrounded by hostile forces, and thereby to venture outside it is a betrayal of the principles of PLR. For instance, the stipulation to communicate research findings does not mean that PLR is confronting quaint or fuddy-duddy conventions or even notoriously restrictive impediments. Instead, it means rising to the most important requirement placed before any form of inquiry – that is, the demand that all suppositions should be open to critical review as well as exacting scrutiny (including one’s fondest assumptions!).

**Rule 6: *Avoid defining PLR as more self-reflexive than other research methods.***

The final rule: avoid the trap of defining PLR as *more* self-reflexive than other forms of research. The self-reflexive emphasis within PLR discourse leads to difficulties for inexperienced PLR candidates, and it also proves to be the most frustrating aspect of its justification, even for its most sympathetic supporters in the academic and research communities. In theory, it simply says that PLR enacts a performative research inquiry – thus also suggesting it is open to engagement with other research methods and approaches – but in practice it translates into a tautological muddiness that leaves itself open to advocating that PLR is its own practice and therefore performs its own research inquiry.

The assertion that PLR is more self-reflexive than other forms of research requires most critical attention. What does this *more* self-reflexive quality of its research consist of? What definition of practice requires a heightened self-reflexive emphasis?

The justification for this argument is that PLR maintains a close connection, or even symmetry, between the requirements of the practice, or even practitioners (beware Rule 2 at this point!) and those of the research question. One difficulty with such an inflection is that it may prompt the false expectation that the ‘needs of practice’ correlate to the ‘needs’ of the practitioner as researcher, and also that they do so immediately and in a perfect circuit. If they don’t, then this presents a failure!

For many postgraduate candidates, this argument is elusive and leads to the greatest difficulties and confusions. PLR espouses an idea of reciprocity that sounds suspiciously

tautological, such as ‘Practice and theory are reciprocal. Critical practice should generate theory and theory should inform practice’ (Gray 1996: 15). Many of Carole Gray’s statements from her 1996 paper are quoted so regularly and so often by PLR candidates they now appear like founding principles. A key one is the contention that PLR is ‘initiated in practice and carried out through practice’. Gray explains that she means by this ‘research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners’ (Gray 1996: 1, 3). What ‘needs’ would these be, and how would they be defined in a research context? This is far from clear, but the unmistakable implication is that they ought to coincide and find each other in a loop in which all is resolved. Sounds nice, but it is another major pitfall.

The bigger risk is that of identity crisis: the equation of the research question with one’s practice. Such an all too-eager conflation runs the risk of falling back on the empty justification that the resulting research is ‘research’ because it is PLR. Many definitions of PLR invite the potential for this major confusion in inexperienced researchers. Indeed, PLR candidates frequently offer tautological explanations of PLR in justifying their research: PLR is research because it is PLR! Yet, the justification for any PLR project cannot be that it is simply PLR. The result is a kind of solipsistic feedback loop in which one is always left searching for the essential ingredient – the research aspect of the research project (with the practice already presupposed). Critical attention needs to be paid to the self-referential aspect of the PLR definition because it is the source of most of its confusion.

*On the contrary, it is more likely that the research insight will be found where the needs of practice and the needs of the practitioner-researcher do not correlate.*

It is important to raise this prospect, at least as a point of contention, in order to avoid the assertion that practice already contains its own research formulation. It is also important in circumventing the resulting hyper-self-reflexivity of PLR. Raising such a proposition does, however, risk another type of reductionism: the complete divorce of the practice from the research inquiry. Of course, this would prove counter-productive and defeat the whole purpose of the exercise. Nonetheless, it is important to suggest that such a non-relation should be explored as a genuinely generative research possibility for PLR.

## Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, this analysis arises from a long and fruitful experience of supervising PLR candidates. These rules are written to enhance what is most challenging and engaging within PLR. Yet they stem from an awareness of the propensity in PLR to fall back on shorthand formulations, which oscillate between defensive definitions or otherwise exalt in euphoric over-estimations of its inquiry (both for little gain). The purpose of such guidelines is to help PLR negotiate the complexity it desires and to provoke future research that will enrich and complicate the current outline of its possibilities.

While many of these observations might be dismissed as parodies of the genuine scholarship occurring in PLR, I believe many postgraduate supervisors will have encountered similar pitfalls at many, if not most stages, of the supervision process. The pressing question is why does this occur in PLR at all? Any suitable response must offer suggestions about how to remedy such shortcomings. One can argue that such pitfalls are endemic to most inexperienced researchers – which is true – but these rules point to some key limitations that may arise from a defensive over-compensation of the research endeavour: the exaggerated novelty of PLR as a research method; defining itself primarily in opposition to other research methods; and emphasising the overly reflexive nature of its inquiry.

These rules suggest, on the contrary, that PLR will prosper in its most provocative research challenges by:

- Making the tension between research uncertainty and concrete research measures its forte – but without resorting to defensive rebukes about the hidebound traditionalism of other research methods or exalting in tautological obscurities that celebrate its exceptional ‘self-reflexive reciprocity’;
- Acknowledging that, while all researchers have a question triggering research, their criteria and objectives may not coincide with the parameters of the question. The greatest challenges – and potentially greatest innovations – that PLR can offer, spring from the discrepancy between the needs of the practice and the research question, rather than a pre-supposition of their harmonious correspondence.

It is important not to assume a necessary or automatic rendezvous between one’s practice and a research inquiry. Again, it is equally important not to let the practice slip from view of the research inquiry. This is what makes PLR a precarious method, but why it also constitutes a challenging mode of inquiry. Hence, a caveat: PLR research questions must somehow relate to the practice, and must never lose sight of the practice in its research inquiry. Yet, at the same time – taking this warning into serious consideration – it is important to maintain that its research innovations are most likely to be found in the discrepancy or chasm between the needs of the practice and the research question rather than in presupposing their readymade or immediate harmonization!<sup>6</sup> To date, it is ironic to note that many of the major voices in PLR have tended to opt for a much more conventional alignment and conception than their sometimes audacious rhetoric makes out.<sup>7</sup>

Having said all this, I can sympathise with those that point out the more absurd administrative contrivances that creative practice can be pushed and contorted into.<sup>8</sup> Yet that does not excuse PLR trading on fuzzy self-reflexivity as an alternative. What I have been suggesting is that while the potentially most provocative insights PLR can pose lurk within its research framework, it fails to develop them due to its obsession with manufacturing a picture of its uniqueness in contrast to currently existing research. The irony is that its ambitions prove too conventional. Thus it cannot perceive why being attuned to its discrepancies can yield a rigorous research method. Furthermore, while

PLR has been largely shaped by the institutional parameters of higher education, there has been a marked tendency in artistic practice over the same period to eschew and ‘surpass structures and institutionalization altogether’. The editors of an *e-flux* special edition on art education call this ‘artistic thinking’ and they note that ‘art at its best does not provide answers and solutions; it creates problems’ (Aranda, Wood & Vidokle 2011). Of course, this position is not without its own special pieties, but it points to a stance that increasingly focuses the attention of art and, more and more frequently, design practices, as well as many other forms of adventurous research – to render problematic rather than to resolve and to render problematic what cannot be resolved. It could be that as PLR pursues its institutional justification, it finds that creative practice heads in another direction entirely. PLR will be forced to confront afresh the object that lies at the heart of its inquiry.

## Endnotes

1. It is interesting to note that in response to the announcement of the impending closure of art history at La Trobe University in Melbourne, Robert Nelson recently observed that art schools are not necessarily the best allies in such situations: ‘Studio art departments, keen to protect a vigorous program of creative hygiene, are mostly scornful of art history. It seems too humanist in its values. For insecure studio academics, art history threatens to cloud the studio purity and seems to infect it with uncreative chronologies’ (Nelson 2012). While this is not the situation everywhere – in fact, it’s safe to say where this schism doesn’t eventuate, the more secure the whole program – it does suggest that in the current climate within higher education, insecurity is pervasive and it is far from clear that artist management or art school autonomy will necessarily produce more magnanimous outcomes if the governing parameters of the system remain unaltered.

2. Or as Scott Brook puts it, practice ‘is itself “made up” of a plethora of non-art practices (of publicising, displaying, evaluating, discussing, funding, networking, manufacturing, selling *et cetera*) that relate to the *trade* (as distinct from craft) which provides any cultural object with its currency (in all senses of this term)’ (Brook 2010: 4).

3. Richard Vella touches on the differences in PLR between early career artists – who are ‘often concerned with the development of technique and see research as a viable career step’ – and advanced career artists, who come to postgraduate research study for ‘consolidation’. He also notes a pragmatic consideration often avoided in these discussions – postgraduate study as a means of continuing or subsidising one’s practice: ‘Needless to say, continuity of employment as an artist in Australia can be quite difficult. Postgraduate research in creative practice can offer that continuity’ (Vella 2005: 2). The financial motivation is also touched on by Jaaniste and Haseman: ‘Access to postgraduate research scholarships is an even greater financial incentive; the three-to-four years full-time stipend that a PhD candidate receives to carry out in-depth creative exploration and presentation is far greater and more constant than that which can be gained through such avenues as arts and cultural grants, and relieves many from the strain of a day job. For studio-based art, design and media academics, research pathways have been driven as much by career pressures ... as by the desire to have the time to spend on their creative practice validated (and remunerated) by the

academy. How easily this works in practice and fits in with already heavy workloads remains a going concern for many educators' (Jaaniste & Haseman 2009: 2).

4. For the reasons just mentioned, I do not believe that the strict division between qualitative and quantitative research adequately accounts for the parameters of research methodologies available, as Haseman (2006) suggests. Yet I do concur with his implicit point that this is the methodological split deemed 'legitimate and acceptable' by the governing standards of academic institutions and its research bodies, which are based on social sciences and 'hard' science conventions.

5. Carole Gray's highly influential 1996 paper on PLR is quite explicit at the outset in arguing that the 'liberating' emergence of PLR is 'slower than might have been anticipated'. Again, she suggests this is due to the 'tensions between professional practices' and the penchant of "academic" education and research' to rely on the methodologies and methods of 'science and social science'. At the time Gray equated these tendencies with a further contrast – 'outdated modernist simplifications' that perpetuated binary dualities – such as 'doing versus thinking and writing' – compared with more nimble and complex postmodern outlooks that pave the way for PLR. Clearly only modernists opted for 'simplifications'. My point is that neither Gray nor other PLR advocates intended these simplifications. Yet time and time again PLR candidates will take up such an explanation as an absolute stance (Gray 1996: 1-2, 7).

6. I would like to thank Jonathan Pitches for his feedback and advice on this paper, particularly for forcing me to consider this point further and thus to elaborate my point better.

7. Some steps have been taken in avoiding this sense of 'natural' alignment within PLR method; see Dan Mafe (2009).

8. For instance, Caroline Durre explains how a studio research MA in visual arts she was asked to examine had a methodology section that outlined 'such rigorous tasks as doing preliminary drawings, reviewing these, then doing final versions'. She adds, 'At first glance this may be amusing; on second thoughts it is tragic' (Durre 2008: 5-6). This could be regarded as simply a bad example of PLR though.

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